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### Boat migration across the Central Mediterranean

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## Boat migration across the Central Mediterranean:

drivers, experiences and responses

Unravelling the Mediterranean Migration Crisis (MEDMIG)

Research Brief No.3 September 2016

Simon McMahon and Nando Sigona



UNIVERSITY OF  
BIRMINGHAM



Boat migration across the Central Mediterranean:  
drivers, experiences and responses

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Nando Sigona

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## Introduction

In 2015 an estimated 1,011,712 people crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in search of safety and a better life. 3,770 are known to have died trying to make this journey<sup>1</sup>. Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Department for International Development (DfID), the MEDMIG project examines the dynamics, determinants, drivers and infrastructures underpinning this recent migration across and loss of life in the Mediterranean. This research brief presents some of our findings in relation to the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa to Italy and Malta, exploring the dynamics of migration before, during and after the sea crossing. We will place particular focus on the motivations, routes and experiences of those making the journey and local, national and European Union (EU) policy responses.

During 2014 and 2015 over 320,000 people made the sea crossing from North Africa towards Europe, arriving in Italy and, to a far lesser degree, Malta. And although the vast majority of the arrivals to Europe by sea during 2015 were through the Eastern Mediterranean to Greece, by far the greatest number of deaths was recorded in the Central Mediterranean. Whereas on the Eastern Mediterranean route one death was recorded for every 1049 arrivals in 2015, on the Central route there was one death for every 53 arrivals<sup>2</sup>. According to IOM, 2,731 people were dead or missing at 31st August 2016, a higher figure than the same period over the past two years<sup>3</sup>. The death rate across the route is now, at the time of writing, 2.4%, up from 2.2% the same period a year ago. Between January and August of 2016 one person has died on the journey for every 42 who have arrived (see Figure 1).

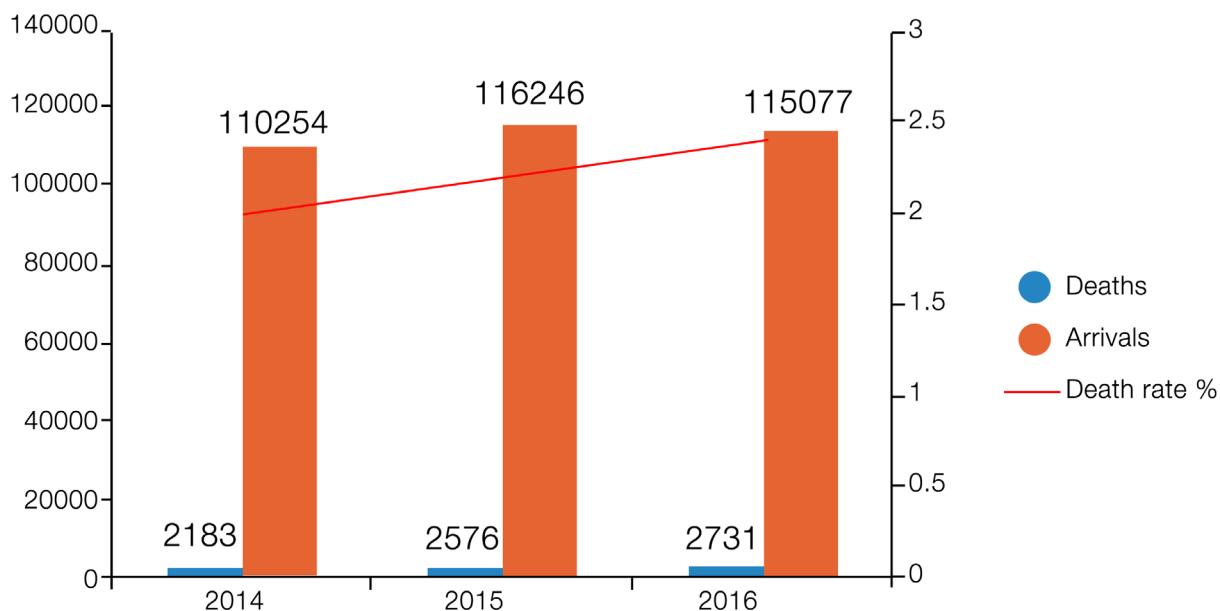


Figure 1. Arrivals, deaths and death rate across the Central Mediterranean route, Jan-August 2014-2016

<sup>1</sup> See IOM (2016) Mixed Migration: Flows in the Mediterranean and Beyond: Compilation of Available Data and Information 2015. Geneva: IOM (GMDAC) [https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation\\_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf](https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/situation_reports/file/Mixed-Flows-Mediterranean-and-Beyond-Compilation-Overview-2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Crawley, H. and Sigona, N.(2016) 'European policy is driving refugees to more dangerous routes across the Med', The Conversation <http://theconversation.com/european-policy-is-driving-refugees-to-more-dangerous-routes-across-the-med-56625>

<sup>3</sup> Deaths data is online at <http://missingmigrants.iom.int/mediterranean>



Despite efforts by governments and international organisations to save lives and control migration across the Central Mediterranean, people have continued to attempt the crossing. This highlights an urgent need to better understand migration flows along this route to Europe.

Responses from policymakers have tended to adopt a particular understanding of the drivers and nature of migration from North Africa to Southern Europe which is based on two main assumptions. The first claims that those making the journey across this route are mostly so-called 'economic migrants' seeking employment and better lifestyles because they originate from countries that are not engaged in warfare<sup>4</sup>. Their nationality is employed as a short-cut that undermines their claims for international protection. The second assumption states that migration across the Central Mediterranean is the result of strong pull factors in Europe encouraging refugees and migrants<sup>5</sup> to make their dangerous journeys. According to this logic, the best response is to adopt a tough stance that can deter people from making the journey.

As will be shown throughout this Research Brief, our research highlights significant shortcomings in these assumptions in the context of mixed and composite migration flows in the Central Mediterranean.

The Brief is structured over three sections, examining the recent history of migration across the Central Mediterranean, followed by a look at the MEDMIG data on migrant and refugee journeys, and the evolving context of arrival and reception in Europe. It draws on 202 interviews with refugees and migrants who crossed the Central Mediterranean Sea to Italy or Malta in 2015 and 55 in-depth interviews with key actors in Italy and Malta, as well as field observations and a desk-based review of the existing literature. The profile of the people that we interviewed broadly reflects the composition of flows at point of arrival in Italy and Malta, with a wide range of nationalities represented from the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, the Horn of Africa and elsewhere in the world (see Figure 2). Our sample also included a majority of male respondents (87%) over female ones (13%), which is a similar pattern to that found in the arriving population of refugees and migrants in 2015.

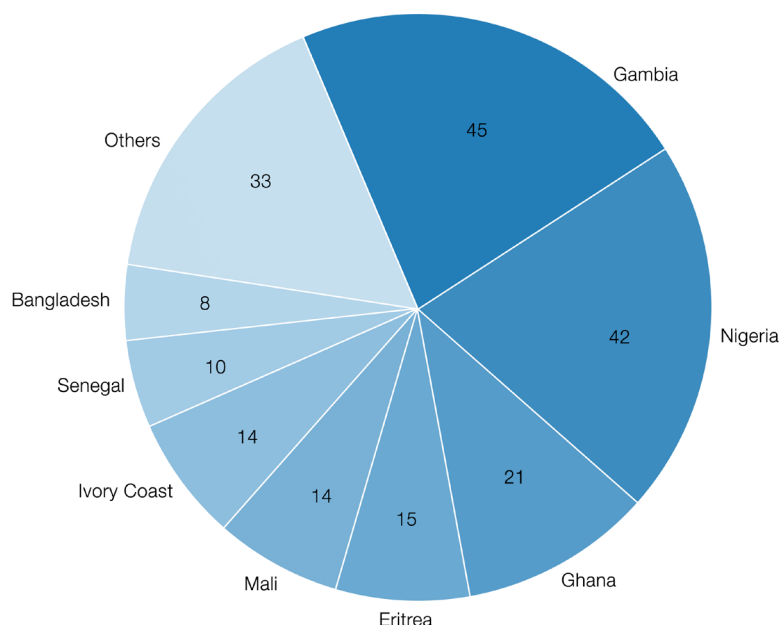


Figure 2: Number of respondents who crossed the Central Mediterranean route to Italy or Malta (n = 202). See Appendix for full figures.

<sup>4</sup> See for example, Reuters (2015) Migrants, Alfano: rimpatriare quelli economici, Ue partecipi economicamente a 'hotspot', Reuters Italia, <http://it.reuters.com/article/topNews/idITKBN0OX1NI20150617>

<sup>5</sup> We use the term 'refugees and migrants' throughout this Research Brief to reflect the nature of 'mixed flows' across the Mediterranean.

## Migration across the Central Mediterranean

### Key points

**Migration across the Mediterranean Sea is not a new phenomenon, but in 2011 and especially during 2014 and 2015 there has been a dramatic increase in the scale of flows.**

**Libya is by far the principle country of departure, although today it is primarily Eastern and sub-Saharan Africans who are on the move rather than North Africans. Patterns of forced and labour migration which have for years seen people move to Libya from Eastern and sub-Saharan Africa continue. Today, it is primarily these people who are boarding the boats to Italy.**

**The most recent increase in the scale of migration flows responds to decreasing stability and safety in North African countries following the Arab Spring and particularly the re-escalation of the conflict in Libya from 2014.**

Throughout history, patterns of trade and population movement have defined the Mediterranean as a space of mobility and exchange. Italy in particular has played an important and evolving role in the region during modern times, from exporter of colonial settlers to receiver of workers and, increasingly, those seeking refuge. Today it plays a key role in migration dynamics, receiving almost all of those intercepted crossing the sea by boat.

Over recent years the scale of migration flows by boat across the Central Mediterranean route from North Africa has increased dramatically (Figure 3). This has led to frequent claims of an ‘emergency’ or ‘crisis’ in the region, from the so-called North Africa Emergency (Emergenza Nord Africa) of 2011 to the more recent ‘Mediterranean migration crisis’. Between 1997 and 2010 an average of 23,000 migrants travelled to Italy by boat per year; in 2011 this rose to 63,000 and in 2014 it reached 170,000, before decreasing slightly to little over 153,800 in 2015. In Malta, in contrast, average annual arrivals of just under 1600 people have been recorded over the past decade, peaking in 2008 (2775) and 2013 (2008) but then declining sharply to 568 in 2014 and 104 in 2015. Between January and August in 2016, 115,077 arrivals were detected on this route, almost exactly the same as the 116,246 arrivals over the same period in 2015. The figures remain high, but there is no evidence of a redirection of flows from the Eastern Mediterranean to the Central route.

Over this time, and as will be seen in more detail in the following sections, there has also been a shift in the governance of maritime migration in the region. Italian and EU agencies have increased their capacity to detect and intercept vessels at sea, which has in turn increased their capacity to count sea crossings. The vast majority of those intercepted are taken to Italian ports, contributing to the decrease in arrivals in Malta.



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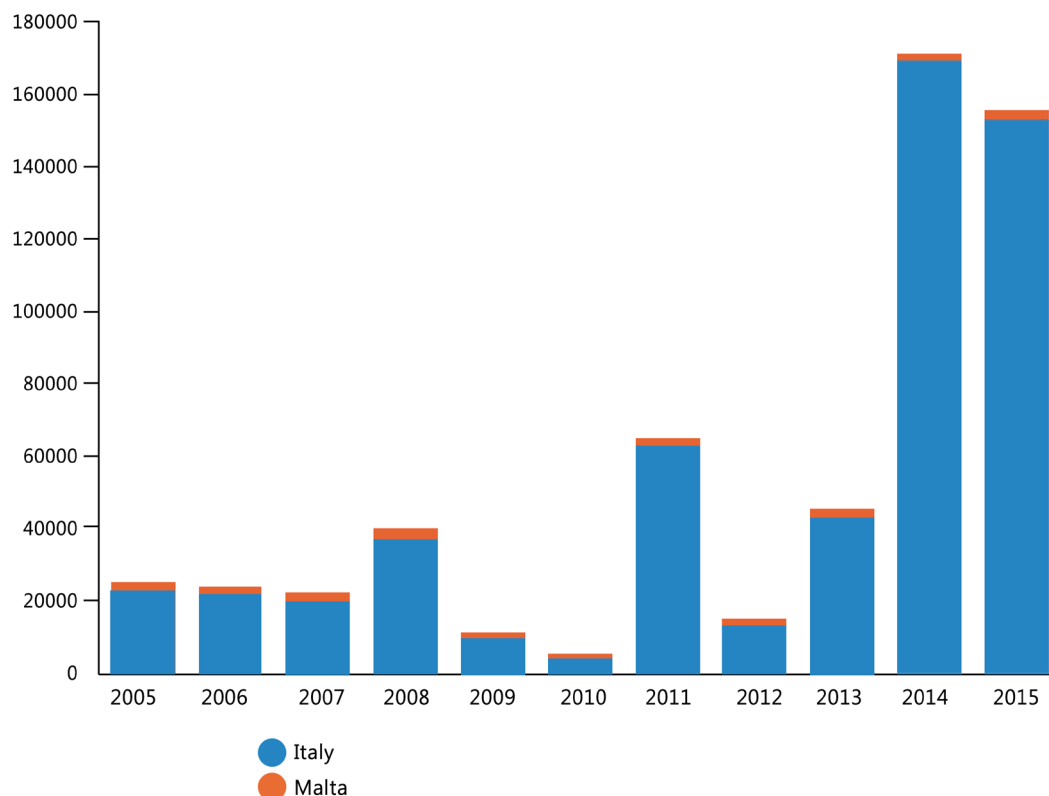


Figure 3. Boat arrivals at the Italian and Maltese coasts. Data from UNHCR, Italian Ministry of the Interior and Maltese Immigration Police<sup>6</sup>

The dynamics behind these migration patterns are closely intertwined with the medium to long-term evolution of international migration patterns to and from the Maghreb, and particularly Libya. In particular, two key recent shifts in migration across the Central Mediterranean should be highlighted. The first was an increase of migration flows to Italy by boat in 2011 when protests for rights and democracy, followed by increasing political instability, swept across many countries of North Africa and the Middle East. Governments in Tunisia and Egypt fell, and military repression, armed insurrection and protracted conflict took hold in Libya. These developments came alongside increasing emigration of North African nationals and migrants and refugees from elsewhere who had previously been resident in places such as Libya and Egypt. Thousands were evacuated from Libya in 2011, but many, many more remained trapped<sup>7</sup>. The second shift

came during 2014 and 2015 when significantly larger flows were recorded crossing the Central Mediterranean. The vast majority of these journeys departed from the northern shores of Libya, as the country descended into renewed civil war with chaos and conflict dividing it into separate military and political regions in violent battle against one another.

The composition of the population making the sea crossing during 2014 and 2015 was highly diverse, including a wide range of countries of origin from Sub-Saharan, Central and East Africa, as well as places further afield such as Pakistan, Bangladesh and Syria (Figure 4). This diversity is illustrated by the fact that the top ten nationalities of arrivals represented only 73% of the total in 2014 and 78% of the total in 2015, in stark contrast to the composition of the migration flow on the Eastern Mediterranean route where 90% of the total number

<sup>6</sup> Italian data is available from UNHCR at <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean>; Maltese data is available from UNHCR at <http://www.unhcr.org/mt/charts/category/12>

<sup>7</sup> Human Rights Watch (2011) Libya: Stranded Foreign Workers Need Urgent Evacuation <https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/02/libya-stranded-foreign-workers-need-urgent-evacuation>

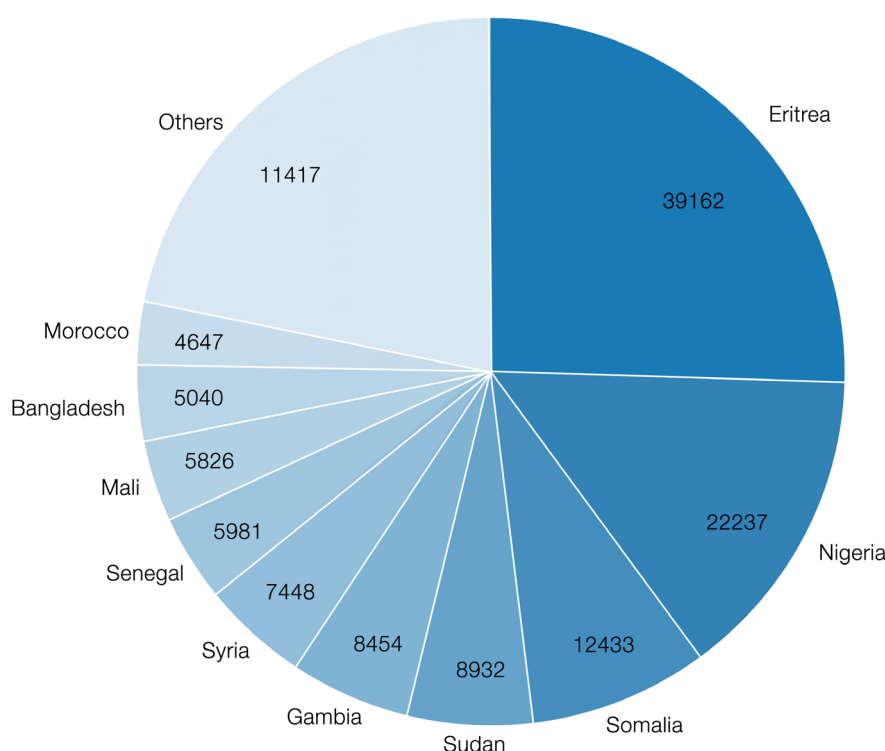


Figure 4. Nationality of arrivals across the Mediterranean Sea to Italy (2015). Data from UNHCR and Italian Ministry of the Interior. See appendix for full figures

of arrivals was made up of only three nationality groups<sup>8</sup>. As will be shown later, the motivations for moving and routes taken also varied widely.

This diverse composition of nationalities crossing reflects the important role that Libya occupied in international migration patterns prior to and during the conflict. During the 2000s, Libya's leader Colonel Ghaddafi welcomed sub-Saharan African workers with an open-door migration policy. Plentiful opportunities in the oil and construction sectors helped Libya to become North Africa's principle hub for migrants. Local and regional migration systems within sub-Saharan Africa were also interrupted during the 2000s by increasing violence, political unrest and economic crises, leading more people to make longer journeys in search of safety and better lives<sup>9</sup>. In 2006 it was estimated that between 65,000 and 120,000 sub-Saharan Africans were entering the Maghreb yearly and that several tens of thousands of them would try to cross the Mediterranean<sup>10</sup>.

By 2011 figures estimated that there could be 2.5 million foreign nationals residing in Libya, equivalent to 42% of its entire population<sup>11</sup>.

The situation of conflict and insecurity has led thousands to flee the country by sea. Yet Libya has continued to occupy a vital role in international migration systems. In 2014, Syrians unable to travel to Europe by air from their place of origin, saw travel through Libya by land as a way to reach Europe, for example. At the time, they could enter Egypt or Algeria without visas before moving on to Libya. But since then, Algeria has removed visa free travel arrangements and Egypt has blocked the border to Libya<sup>12</sup>. As will be explored further in this Research Brief, our research clearly shows that for many Libya also continues to be considered a popular destination country for migrants and refugees from far afield. The following section examines these varied journeys in more detail.

<sup>8</sup> Data from UNHCR <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

<sup>9</sup> Altai Consulting for IOM MENA Regional Office (2015) Migration Trends Across the Mediterranean: Connecting the Dots (Altai Consulting); MAFE (2013) Changing patterns of migration between Africa and Europe: Departures, trajectories and returns, MAFE Project Policy Briefing No. 2 (SCMR, UCL & INED), <http://mafeproject.site.ined.fr/en/publications/briefs/>

<sup>10</sup> De Haas, H. (2006) Trans-Saharan Migration to North Africa and the EU: Historical Roots and Current Trends, Migration Policy Institute <http://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/trans-saharan-migration-north-africa-and-eu-historical-roots-and-current-trends>

<sup>11</sup> MPC (2013) MPC-Migration Profile: Libya, CARIM South database and publications, Migration Policy Centre, [http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration\\_profiles/Libya.pdf](http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/docs/migration_profiles/Libya.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Al Monitor (2014) 'Egypt tightens border security amid Libyan unrest' <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/egypt-tightens-border-controls-libya-unrest-hifter.html>



## Unpacking the journey: drivers, routes, experiences

### Key points

**People who migrated through the Central Mediterranean route departed from their countries of origin for a wide range of different and often intersecting reasons.**

**When people set out from their place of origin they did not necessarily have clear plans about where their final destination would be. Their plans were often informed by transnational networks and hearsay picked up along established migration routes.**

**Migration across the Mediterranean Sea is just one part of several much longer migration flows which originate in and pass through numerous countries before merging in Libya.**

**Libya is highly dangerous. Over 75% of the people we spoke to who had traversed Libya explicitly referred to experiences of physical violence there. Over a quarter spoke of experiences related to death in some way.**

**The sea journey was considered to be the only way out of Libya: those boarding the boats did not think that there was any other way of escaping.**

In this section we will examine the journeys to and across the Central Mediterranean, with a particular focus on the drivers, routes and experiences of those making the journey. These early findings from our project highlight the complexity of the migration flows arriving in Europe and signal some of the reasons for their continuation over time.

### *Beyond forced vs. economic migrants*

The migration population arriving in Europe across the Mediterranean Sea has often been described according to the proportion of nationals from so-called 'refugee-producing countries'<sup>13</sup>. This generalisation suggests a coherent and more or less structured flow of people who are either refugees or economic migrants, according to their country of origin. However, our findings show that in reference to the Central Mediterranean route, such a view is severely limited and that there is a need for a more nuanced understanding of the background and character of this migration.

The drivers of migration to and across the Mediterranean are multiple and intersect in complex ways. The migration flow brings together people who have left their places of origin for a

wide range of different reasons. We found that often security, political, economic or personal concerns were not mutually exclusive influences on their decisions to move. From our sample, two thirds (66%) explicitly mentioned motivations that could be described as 'forced migration', such as moments of violence, death threats, religious persecution and so on. Moreover, 38% of the respondents also discussed economic factors, such as seeking to escape from poverty, find employment or be able to send money home to support a family. Others mentioned personal reasons such as being in a relationship that was disapproved of by friends or family.

If we take a closer look at specific reasons for leaving places of origin, the most common were related to insecurity and a lack of safety, principally experiences of violence and death (of someone close to the interviewee or threats to the interviewee's life). Among people whose journeys originated in West Africa the threat posed by militia groups, terrorist organisations or armed confraternities, as well as violent rituals, land disputes and fights among extended families, were often mentioned. Tribal and militia-based violence, for example of Al Shabaab in Somalia, were frequently mentioned in interviews with East Africans.

<sup>13</sup> This terminology can be found, for example, in material produced by UNHCR. See <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

**“ I tried to fight back with the Muslims [Boko Haram] but I had to run away. I had nothing in Nigeria. They burned everything. There was nothing left there. They tried to kill me”.**

(Nigerian man aged 26)

**“ Originally, I was just aiming to get out of Somalia, away from Al Shabaab and to a safe place. My father and brother were killed by Al Shabaab and soon after, when my uncle was killed, I finally decided I needed to leave”.**

(Somalian man aged 18)

Political persecution or localised situations of civil unrest were also widespread. Interviewees from places as diverse as Gambia, Nigeria and Pakistan spoke of violence due to their membership of a political party, the threat of imprisonment and facing corrupt or unfair legal processes. The threat of permanent conscription into the military and a general lack of freedom were key reasons for those who left Eritrea.

**“ I decided to leave because I was left alone with my children. My husband was in prison and later killed. He was a journalist in Eritrea ... several letters had arrived about joining the military service which he had so far managed to escape with false medical certificates. He was arrested and tortured. They wanted information on opponents that he did not have. And they killed him”**

(Eritrean woman aged 35)

Finally, to a lesser degree economic reasons were also mentioned, such as unemployment and poverty. They included the wish to find or improve a job, to move beyond living a hand-to-mouth existence, or to be able to send remittances from abroad in order for the interviewee's family to survive. In West Africa in particular, there have been widespread labour migration patterns of this type for decades, the vast majority of which remain within Africa<sup>14</sup>. We found, moreover, that among those arriving in Europe from West Africa there were many cases in which had the

capacity of a family to provide for itself had been harmed by a situation of insecurity.

The diversity of reasons for leaving places of origin means that attempts to categorise individual countries as producers of either refugees or economic migrants are highly problematic. What is more, multiple reasons for migration were often inter-related in the decision making of individual people. Violence, political persecution or corruption can not only put someone's life in danger, but also harm their capacity to provide for themselves and their families. During our interviews, people from West African countries such as Gambia or Ivory Coast, for example, spoke of contexts of crime, political corruption and violence in which there was too a lack of economic opportunities. People from Bangladesh emphasised economic and political reasons for moving to Libya with labour agencies. One Ethiopian man emigrated to a refugee camp after his father was unjustly imprisoned, but had to continue moving further away to find opportunities which would enable him to support his family. Such examples highlight the ways that security, political, economic and personal reasons for leaving places of origin often feed into each other.

**“ The interviewee comes from a poor family ... His eldest brother was the only one with a regular job and he provided for the family: he was a “big politician”, but he has been killed by members of the rival party ... the interviewee decided to emigrate in order to find a job and maintain his family. At that time the only possibility was to go to Libya, as there he could obtain a visa”**

(Bangladeshi man aged 18)

<sup>14</sup> Altai Consulting for IOM Nigeria (2015) Irregular Migration between West Africa, North Africa and the Mediterranean (IOM Nigeria)

## Intended destinations

The migration population. The public perception of the migration crisis in European countries has often reflected concern over the amount of people arriving, and in turn political leaders in many countries have used this fear to justify closing their borders against new arrivals. The impression is given that the vast majority of migrants in Africa and the Middle East are on their way to Europe, and that something should be done to deter them<sup>15</sup>.

In contrast, our research shows that when the migrants and refugees on the Central Mediterranean route initially set out from their place of origin they often did not have very clear plans about where their final destination would be. Only one third (37.5%) of the interviewees who spoke about their intentions said that they had been intending to move to Europe when they set out, and even then they often had little specific knowledge about a particular European country. Europe was, instead, imagined by many as a place of general safety and freedom, a view built up with information from people who had made the journey before as well as rumours among friends and from accessing European popular culture.

More precise intentions could, however, develop over the course of the migration experience and following arrival in Europe. As an example, although less than 1% of those who spoke of particular intended destinations said that when they set out from their place of origin they were seeking to reach Germany, 14.5% said that at the time of the interview they decided that they would like to go there.

**“ I had heard so many times about Italy. On television they show it as a place where life is good. Where there is democracy. Where you live peacefully. People who return from outside always seem rich”**

(Egyptian man aged 18)

Particularly significant is the number of people who said that Libya had been their intended destination. Over one third of the respondents (36%) stated that when they left their country of origin they were seeking to move there. Many expected that there would be readily available employment and support from social networks of past emigrants, but they also lacked an awareness of the severity of the ongoing conflict and security situation. This impression was constructed and perpetuated by information exchange through transnational networks, from people who had made the journey in previous years and smugglers who would relay information back to countries of transit and origin whilst offering to facilitate the journey. It is a clear sign of the strength and durability of pre-existing migration networks from Africa and further afield.

**“ I wanted to go to Libya. In Libya there are some problems, I knew there was a conflict there but I had one friend who said they would help me to find a job”**

(Ghanaian man aged 29)

**“ Even if [the connection men] knew the truth [about Libya], they wouldn't tell you. And you wouldn't believe it until you see it”**

(Nigerian man aged 32)

Of the remainder of the research participants (27%), nearly every one stated that when they left their place of origin they sought either a nearby place or had no specific destination in mind. Often, they had intended to get away from a particular situation of harm, with little time to prepare, or were seeking labour opportunities that were not too far from home. This was particularly the case among people who originated from countries in West Africa.

**“ We didn't know anything about Malta, we didn't know where we were going. This was the same for me when I left Gambia, I didn't know where I was going, I didn't have a plan. I just wanted to find somewhere stable to live and work”**

(Gambian man aged 20)

<sup>15</sup> BBC News (2016) 'EU's Tusk warns illegal economic migrants: Do not come here', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35714087>





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## Routes and experiences

Rather than representing one homogeneous flow, migration across the Central Mediterranean should be seen primarily as a product of the merging of multiple flows from diverse locations within and beyond the African continent. These flows are varied in terms of the routes and experiences of the journeys that are made and bring together a diverse composition of people with an array of motivations and aspirations.

From our sample we have identified 36 different countries that our interviewees had traversed before reaching Italy or Malta, and 68 different combinations of routes through them. These routes would converge and diverge in certain countries and towns or cities, evolving over several months or even years (see Figure 5). The multiple flows that merge through the Central Mediterranean can be broadly categorised in four main routes according to their geographical provenience:

1. A **North African route** originating in Morocco, Tunisia, Libya or Egypt, with only one leg by boat across the sea to Europe.
2. A **West African route** originating in countries of West and sub-Saharan Africa<sup>16</sup>, made up of highly fragmented and often lengthy trajectories with multiple stops along the way. Disparate flows would converge in Burkina Faso (35% of our interviewees from this region), Mali (45%) and then Niger (83%) on the way to Libya (99% of interviewees).
3. An **East African route** originating in the Horn of Africa<sup>17</sup>, made up of fragmented and long trajectories with various stops, often first in towns or refugee camps in Ethiopia or Sudan. 96% of our interviewees from East African countries stopped in Sudan and most of them (70%) stayed in Khartoum. From there if they were unable to travel by air then they would set out to cross Libya or, less frequently Egypt, by land towards the Mediterranean.
4. Routes from the **rest of the world** show patterns of migration that did not easily fit into the types outlined above, originating in countries beyond Africa such as Syria, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Moreover, they equally converged with the others in Libya.

Few respondents from our sample had moved directly to Europe within a short timescale. Instead, it was more common for journeys to be interspersed with short or long stops in various locations before deciding to come to Europe. This is reflected in the fact that 28% of our interviewees had left their country of origin between 1 and 6 months before arriving and 42% had done so more than a year before arriving. One fifth (20%) of respondents reported considerably broader trajectories incorporating lengthy periods of settlement in multiple places over several years.

<sup>16</sup> From our sample interviewees on this route came from Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Ivory Coast, Mali, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone or Togo

<sup>17</sup> From our sample interviewees on this route came from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia or Sudan



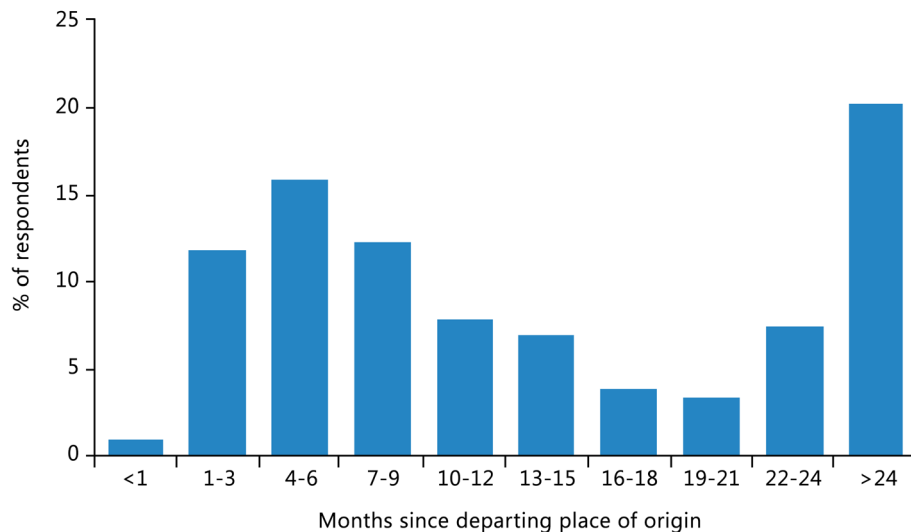


Figure 5. Duration of journeys to Europe through Central Mediterranean in months (% of respondents)

Along these different routes, quite distinct dynamics and experiences could be found, as well as smaller sub-flows with their own particular characteristics. Common across all of them was the primarily fragmentary and protracted nature of migration trajectories to Europe, with stops of varying lengths in certain places punctuated by moments of onward movement. These stops and journeys often had particular drivers and dynamics.

Initial migration patterns from countries of origin were usually directed at nearby locations where it would be possible to rest, find employment, connect with friends or kin or find someone to facilitate onward movement. In the ECOWAS free movement area of West Africa, local and regional migration of this type could be organised at short notice by travel agencies, friends or family members. It would involve travel by bus, car or hitching a lift, with the possibility of moving easily in many cases enabling people to quickly get away from situations of violence or personal danger. In East Africa, in contrast, migration initially involved crossing often dangerous borders, particularly in the case of Eritrea where snipers would reportedly shoot at people attempting to cross. The journey required planning, preparation and sometimes the aid of a smuggler to be carried out.

Subsequent onward migration would follow stops in places relatively near to the place of origin. Stops could be short, intended only as rest to wait for a connection, seek a smuggler or find temporary work to pay for the journey to the intended destination, as was widely reported of Burkina Faso and especially Niger where extreme poverty and a harsh climate meant few people considered staying there

for long. Elsewhere, onward movement could also come in response to a lack of opportunities or a need to escape new situations of insecurity, as was common among Gambians in Mali and Eritreans in Sudanese or Ethiopian refugee camps, for example.

Onward migration could also take place months or years after the primary movement. Lengthy periods of settlement and attempts to start a new life were reported among East Africans in the Sudanese capital Khartoum, for example, or among Syrians in Egypt. Onward movement came when economic opportunities appeared to have run out or corruption was seen as too much of an obstacle in these places. In the specific case of Egypt, Syrians spoke of moving away due to increasing restrictions and repression in everyday life following the establishment of the government of Abdeh Fattah el-Sisi.

For 96% of our interviewees, these onward movements eventually involved crossing into Libya. As noted above, there was a widespread perception among many of those on the move that Libya continued to be a place of plentiful opportunities to work, as indeed it was for many people before 2011. The journeys into Libya were, however, fraught with difficulties and required smugglers to negotiate the route. From the South through Niger, migrants and refugees would be squeezed onto pick-ups and driven through the desert with a high risk of dying from drought, starvation or falling from the vehicle. On the journey through Chad or Sudan to the South East our interviewees frequently experienced forced stops at military checkpoints and traps set by militia or bandits.

Kidnappings were common, although it was often unclear who the perpetrators were from among bandits, militia organisations or even the military of that particular country. From Algeria in the West, bribes would often be needed to pass armed guards at border checkpoints.

The final onward migration flows to Europe were in almost all cases those departing from Libya. This movement was for the vast majority motivated by a search for safety from violence and exploitation. Experiences of being kidnapped, arbitrarily arrested, held up at gunpoint or not paid for a day's work were described by almost all of our interviewees. Over 75% of the people we spoke to who had traversed Libya explicitly referred to experiences of physical violence there. Over a quarter had an experience related to death in some way, such as seeing someone shot or die from hunger, or watching a boat sink out at sea. Women spoke of being unable to leave their places of residence and suffering sexual as well as physical violence. Such experiences appear to be more or less indiscriminate, affecting all age groups to a similar degree, except perhaps for a slight decline in experiences of violence and death among older people.

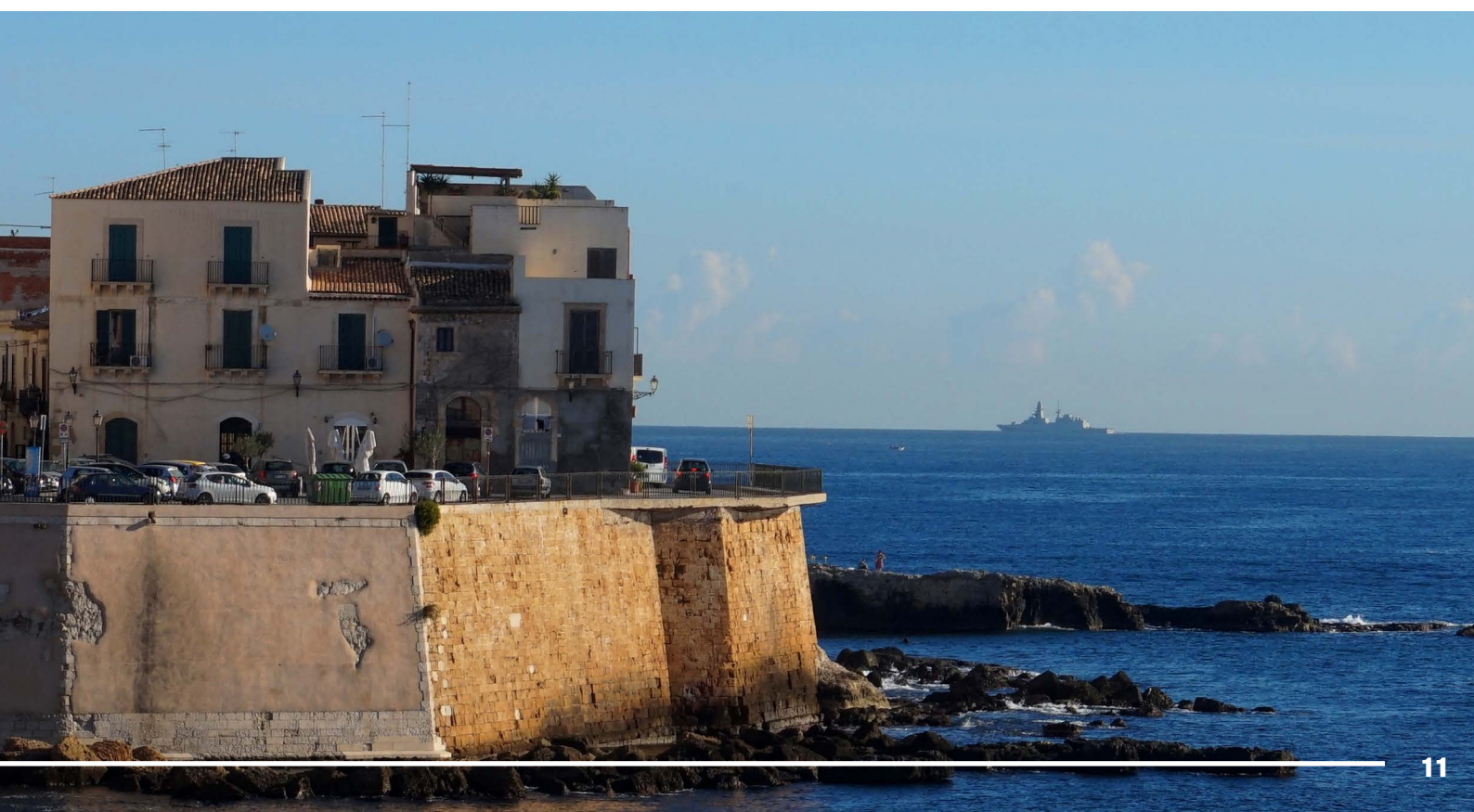
**“ They took us to a very isolated place and we lived in a stable for a month, where there were also animals. We couldn't leave. On the farm there were other women who had also arrived from Nigeria. The men who were to supposed to watch us raped us many times**

(Nigerian woman aged 25)

Some of those fleeing Libya had resided there for a long time, such as Bangladeshi workers who had moved there in the years preceding the war, arriving by plane directly from Bangladesh or following previous stops in the Middle East. Others sought to remain in Libya only long enough to find a way to leave. Among those we met, the sea journey was considered to be the only way out: they saw no other way of escaping the country.

**“ Libya is like a hole. You can enter and then you can't go back ... they seize you when you are going, it is very difficult to get out”**

(Gambian man aged 19)



## After the boat: policy context and reception conditions

### Key points

**During the 2000s and especially since 2011 there was a rapid expansion of refugee and migrant reception measures at sea and facilities in Italy.**

**Sea interceptions of boats de facto stopped almost all spontaneous arrivals on Italian and Maltese shores and regularised the disembarkation process.**

**Almost all refugees and migrants are taken to Italy, where a complex reception system is in place to identify, categorise and relocate them.**

**Deficiencies in the Italian reception system, arbitrary decision-making and the efforts of migrants and refugees to transit out of Italy contributed to a widespread production of irregular migration and settlement.**

**The recent establishment of ‘hotspots’ in Italy has represented an attempt to Europeanise the crisis, but at the same time encapsulates deep tensions pervading the EU project as a whole.**

The rising and evolving migration flows across the Central Mediterranean since 2011 have been accompanied by significant transformations in the governance of mobility and border control in the region, in particular in Italy. This has been accompanied by a rapid expansion of the reception system for newcomers. The context of reception for refugees and migrants who have crossed the sea highlights, however, the multidimensional nature of the crisis: while there may be consensus among Italian and EU policymakers on the immediate importance of saving lives at sea, there has been less agreement on what the long-term perspective should be after the boat journey<sup>18</sup>.

### From sea to land

In response to increasing migration flows and the rising death rate across the Central Mediterranean, policymakers and humanitarian organisations have expanded their operations at sea significantly. Tragedies in which hundreds died in 2013 and 2015 acted as the catalyst for the Mare Nostrum operation led by the Italian Navy throughout 2014 and the Joint Operation Triton under

the command of the EU border agency Frontex during 2015. The Italian Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre (based at the Capitaneria di Porto in Rome) took on an overall coordinating role. Frontex also established the Joint Operation Sophia which was set the objective of seeking to destroy boats potentially used for smuggling but has faced a range of legal and logistical difficulties in carrying this out in practice<sup>19</sup>. At the same time, numerous humanitarian organisations such as Medecins Sans Frontieres, SOS Mediterranee and MOAS have contributed with their own rescue missions.

The sense of crisis at sea has brought about a unification of the maritime governance of the route, pooling together resources and taking all rescued migrants and refugees to the reception system in Italy, unless in situations of urgent medical need. The interception of boats at sea during 2014 and 2015 also brought about the de facto disappearance of almost all spontaneous and undetected sea arrivals in Italy and Malta and contributed to what can be considered a ‘normalisation of the emergency’. In Italy and Malta the tone of political and public debate moved from

<sup>18</sup> McMahon, S. (2016) ‘After the boats: refugee reception and the production of irregularity in Italy’s migration crisis’, Middle East Institute Refugees Adrift? Series, [www.mei.edu/content/map/after-boats-refugee-reception-and-production-irregularity-italy-s-migration-crisis](http://www.mei.edu/content/map/after-boats-refugee-reception-and-production-irregularity-italy-s-migration-crisis)

<sup>19</sup> McMahon, S. and Malcolm, J. (2015) Humanitarian emergency is being used to justify dangerous measures to stop migration, The Conversation (<https://theconversation.com/humanitarian-emergency-is-being-used-to-justify-dangerous-measures-to-stop-migration-40734>)

emphasising perceived threats from clandestine migration (and an associated vocabulary of ‘invasions’ and ‘tidal waves’) to a more humanitarian narrative constructed around sea rescues and Christian values of solidarity (with Pope Francis occupying an important moral leadership role), although the policy objective has continued to be to stop the migration flows.

Following interception at sea, almost all of the people making the Central Mediterranean crossing in 2015 were taken to Italian shores, where they entered into a complex, multi-layered refugee reception system. The current official reception system in Italy is basically two-pronged: there is an ‘ordinary’ system providing short-term accommodation, legal support and then longer-term measures for integration for asylum claimants (the SPRAR system), and an ‘emergency’ one which provides only short-term accommodation and basic services. In response to the increase in arrivals in 2014 and 2015, the emergency regime underwent an enormous and rapid expansion: whereas in February 2015 there were 37,028 people recorded in temporary reception centres (the CAS), by November of the same year this had increased to 72,377. At the end of July 2016, 104,606 people were housed in temporary reception centres<sup>20</sup>. At the same time, the existing ordinary system was, and is, often co-opted into receiving emergency arrivals.

While effective in rapidly increasing Italy’s stock of places for refugees and migrants, the developments of 2015 led to many concerns being raised regarding the uneven and often sub-standard quality of service provision in the emergency system, as well as cases of outright corruption<sup>21</sup>. The reception regime overall in Italy continued to suffer from insufficient space to accommodate new arrivals, which was further aggravated by lengthy bureaucratic timescales meaning months could pass before an appointment with an

asylum commission would be confirmed.

One implication of the shortcomings of the formal reception system is a widespread production of irregular migration and settlement. This can be defined as a third informal reception regime alongside the formal ordinary and emergency ones<sup>22</sup>. The informal regime mostly caters for three categories of people: those who were previously in the formal system but no longer had an entitlement to support; those who didn’t want to apply for asylum in Italy and wanted to rapidly move to other destinations without being identified, and those who despite applying for asylum did not want or were not offered a place in the formal reception system.

In Figure 6 we find two indicators of the scale of the issue. The first is the gap between sea arrivals (the blue bar) and the number of asylum applications lodged (the yellow bar). This highlights that although everyone who was intercepted at sea in 2015 was taken into the refugee reception system, a large part of them did not complete applications for asylum (and this gap is likely to be even wider as the figure for asylum applications also includes individuals who did not arrive by sea). Many, especially (although not exclusively) from countries in the Horn of Africa, North Africa or Syria, became so-called *transitanti* (migrants in transit) who sought to leave Italy and move on to other countries. Existent social and kinship networks across Europe, as well as solidarity groups and social movements within Italy, supported their onward movement and warned them that they should leave the formal reception centres if they did not want to be ‘parked’ in Italy’s slow and unpredictable asylum system. This practice has been object of contention in the EU and during 2016 neighbouring countries sought to significantly reduce it through the introduction of tighter controls at entry and exit points to and from Italy, as well as proposing a security fence at the Italo-Austrian border.

<sup>20</sup> Latest data on the reception system is available from the Italian Ministry of the Interior at <http://www.libertacivilimmigrazione.dlci.interno.gov.it/it/documentazione/statistica/cruscotto-statistico-giornaliero>

<sup>21</sup> MSF (2016) Fuori Campo (Medecins Sans Frontieres), <http://www.medicisenzafrontiere.it/notizie/news/fuori-campo-mappa-dell%E2%80%99accoglienza-che-esclude>; LasciateCIEntrare (2016) Accoglienza: La Vera Emergenza (LasciateCIEntrare) <http://www.lasciatecientrare.it/j25/italia/news-italia/193-scaricabile-il-rapporto-di-lasciatecientrare-accogliere-la-vera-emergenza>

<sup>22</sup> MSF (2016) Fuori Campo (Medecins Sans Frontieres), <http://www.medicisenzafrontiere.it/notizie/news/fuori-campo-mappa-dell%E2%80%99accoglienza-che-esclude>



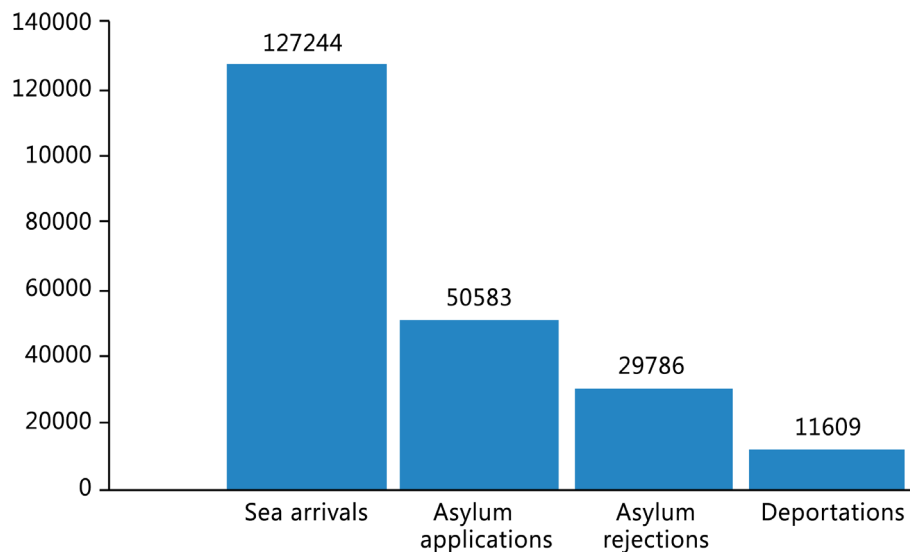


Figure 6. Arrivals, asylum applications, deportations in Italy (Jan - Oct 2015). Data from Italian Ministry of the Interior.

The second indicator is the gap between those not granted a legal status to remain in Italy (asylum rejections) and those given deportation orders. This signals a large proportion of people who were not given legal status to remain in Italy, and therefore not able to access the services of the formal reception system, but were not physically removed from the country either. During our fieldwork it became increasingly common for people also to be given ‘deferred expulsion orders’ telling them to leave Italian territory on their own, although they obviously lacked the resources to be able to do so. In such a situation, migrants and refugees may find local support networks to help them lodge their asylum applications or they may move into informal accommodation and work in the underground labour market<sup>23</sup>. For many, living conditions have been deplorable and dangerous.

**“ We are very good in rescuing them in the sea, the Italians the efforts they are doing are amazing. Everything that happens in the sea, with the boats, they are very good in the first part, and after that, when we talk about long-term solutions, the country has a very weak system”**

(Stakeholder)

### ***The Europeanisation of the crisis: a crisis of Europe?***

Over the course of 2015 there were also intensified calls by the Italian and Maltese governments for closer cooperation among EU institutions and Member States in the management of irregular crossings in the Mediterranean. This was not especially new. Malta had consistently called for such measures for over a decade. The transition from Mare Nostrum to Operation Triton and its successor Operation Triton Plus in late 2014 had also already taken a first step towards greater cooperation. The next step consisted in a gradual shift of attention away from maritime operations onto ways of managing refugees and migrants once on land. The outcome has been the establishment of a series of ‘hotspots’ at the Italian ports of Lampedusa, Pozzallo, Trapani and Taranto where new arrivals are contained, identified and relocated (either to the Italian reception system, to other EU Member States or to countries of origin). The European Asylum Support Agency (EASO) has also been given greater resources and responsibility, heralding closer involvement of the EU not only in Italian border management but also in the status recognition of asylum applications. The Italian authorities have at the same time been pressured by neighbouring EU

<sup>23</sup> McMahon, S. (2015) ‘For migrants in Sicily, group expulsion is the order of the day – but is it legal?’, The Conversation, <https://theconversation.com/for-migrants-in-sicily-group-expulsion-is-the-order-of-the-day-but-is-it-legal-49611>; McMahon, S. (2016) ‘After the boats: refugee reception and the production of irregularity in Italy’s migration crisis’, Middle East Institute Refugees Adrift? Series, [www.mei.edu/content/map/after-boats-refugee-reception-and-production-irregularity-italy-s-migration-crisis](http://www.mei.edu/content/map/after-boats-refugee-reception-and-production-irregularity-italy-s-migration-crisis)

Member States into carrying out more stringent identification procedures. Meanwhile, the relocation programme to places within Europe has dramatically failed to reach its intended targets: as of 30th August 2016 only 1020 people had been relocated from Italy, far behind the target of 39,600<sup>24</sup>.

One of the implications of the process of Europeanisation, with the associated tightening of identification measures and restrictions on informal transit migration, has been a spike in asylum applications. As a result, the already overwhelmed Italian asylum system has had to process a higher volume of applicants than before. The closure of transit routes out of Italy and the repatriation of people from northern border towns such as Ventimiglia to the Hotspots in the south have further compounded the difficulty of the situation. People are being kept in Italy despite the fact that many of them had

never intended to move to or stay there when they began their migration experience.

Data on asylum decisions (see Figure 7) also show that at the same time Italian authorities' have adopted a less benign approach to asylum applications from 'non refugee-producing countries', with rejections raising considerably. The practice of issuing deferred expulsion orders seems to have become more frequent too. These processes have brought about an increase in the production of illegality among the migrant and refugee population. The ultimate goal seems to be to deter secondary migration towards the north of Europe, but in practice it risks creating a large precarious population with few rights and no access to formal reception facilities and support networks.

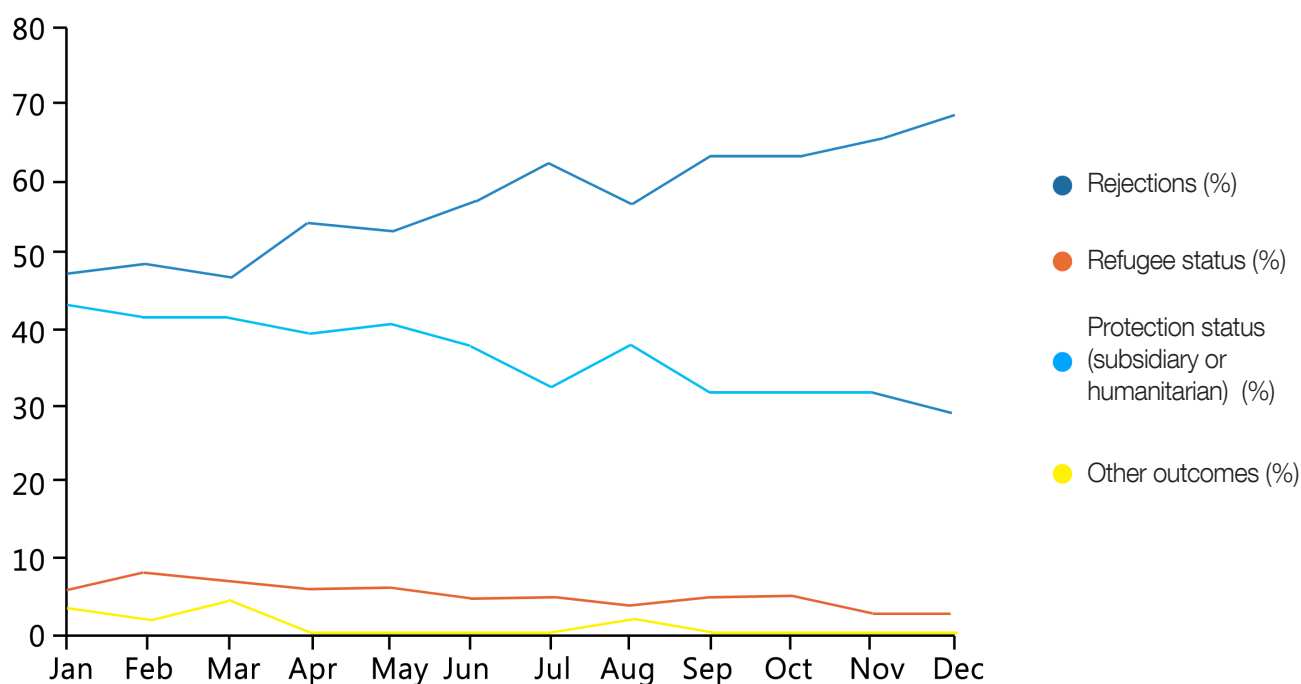


Figure 7. Asylum application outcomes in Italy during 2015. Data from Italian Ministry of the Interior.

<sup>24</sup> A regularly updated 'State of play' of the relocation programme is available at <https://t.co/wlzda4suJL>



## Conclusions

As we have seen in this Research Brief, migration across the Mediterranean Sea is not a new phenomenon, but in 2011 and especially during 2014 and 2015 there was a dramatic increase in the scale of migration flows. Libya was, and continues today to be, by far the main country of departure, although it is primarily Eastern and sub-Saharan Africans who are on the move rather than North Africans. As well as people travelling to Europe, patterns of forced and labour migration which have for years seen people move to Libya from Eastern and sub-Saharan Africa continue, but due to the context of violence and insecurity there, they end up boarding the boats and heading out to sea.

The migration flow across the Central Mediterranean route is diverse in many ways. It is composed of an array of nationalities and ethnicities, who have usually travelled through various countries over a period of months or years before arriving in Europe. What is often considered a homogeneous migration flow across the sea should in reality, therefore, be seen as a series of sub-flows that converge in Libya. Experiences of refugees and migrants in these sub-flows vary, as do the dynamics of the journeys. What is common across most of them is the fragmented and protracted nature of the broader migration trajectories and experiences of violence in Libya.

This diversity and complexity of motivations and experiences provides a challenge for the reception system in Italy and the rest of Europe. Although policy responses and public opinion have often presented a binary categorisation between forced and economic migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea, our research highlights varying ways that the drivers of migration are complex and

intersect with one another. Security, economic and personal motivations for leaving a place of origin or for getting on a boat to Europe are often not mutually exclusive, but inter-related. This complicates the process of determining the legal status and asylum applications of people arriving in Europe, as international protection is dependent on the individual's experience rather than their nationality.

The governance of migration across the Central Mediterranean has also undergone significant changes, particularly in relation to the shifting role of the EU and its Member States at Italy's borders. Sea interceptions of migrant boats have de facto stopped almost all spontaneous arrivals on Italian and Maltese shores, creating an impression of control and order in the governance of the crisis. Yet at the same time deficiencies in the reception system, arbitrary decision-making and the efforts of migrants and refugees to transit out of Italy have contributed to an unpredictable situation of widespread production of irregular migration and settlement.

In this context, the establishment of hotspots and the failure of the refugee relocation programme are symbols of a stuttering attempt to Europeanise the governance of migration across the Central Mediterranean. In practice, migrants and refugees are being increasingly contained in Italy. This is despite the fact, highlighted in our interviews, that many of those making the crossing did not intend to move to or stay in Italy when they set out from their place of origin or even when they boarded the boats in Libya. The outcome is a reception system for refugees and migrants which struggles to catch up with the reality as it plays out on the ground.

## About the project

Since September 2015 a team of researchers led by the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations (CTPSR) at Coventry University working in collaboration with University of Birmingham's Institute for Research into Superdiversity and the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society at Oxford University in the UK and partners in Greece (ELIAMEP), Italy (FIERI), Turkey (Yasar University) and Malta (People for Change Foundation), has been undertaking research into the migration crisis at the borders of Southern Europe.

The MEDMIG project aims to better understand the processes which influence, inform and shape migration by speaking directly with those who crossed the Mediterranean in 2015 and with the numerous state and non-state actors who create opportunities and constraints along the way. It provides the first large-scale, systematic and comparative study of the backgrounds, experiences, routes and aspirations of refugees and migrants in three EU Member States - Italy, Greece and Malta – and Turkey. Our researchers were based in the field from September 2015 to January 2016, observing events as they unfolded. During this time we interviewed 500 refugees and migrants travelling via the Central and Eastern Mediterranean routes: 205 in Italy (Sicily, Apulia, Rome, Piedmont, Bologna) and 20 in Malta (Central Mediterranean route); 215 in Greece (Athens, Lesbos) and 60 in Turkey (Izmir, Istanbul) (Eastern Mediterranean route). We also interviewed more than 100 stakeholders, including politicians, policy makers, naval officers and coastguards, representatives of international, non-governmental and civil society organisations, as well as volunteers to gain broader insights into the experiences and journeys of the refugees and migrants with whom they come into contact.

These four countries enable a comparison of the backgrounds, experiences and aspirations of those using different routes and contribute to better understanding the ways that nationality, economic status and education,

gender, ethnicity and age shape the journeys and experiences of refugees and migrants. This also enables us to investigate how migration flows respond to changing political opportunities and policy openings led by national governments and EU-wide initiatives. Within these countries the project employed a purposive sampling strategy to ensure that the backgrounds and demographic characteristics of respondents were broadly reflective of wider trends.

Further information about the MEDMIG project, past and forthcoming events and future outputs together with contacts details for all of the team members can be found on our website [www.medmig.info](http://www.medmig.info)

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank very much our international partners FIERI and ARCI in Italy and the People for Change Foundation in Malta for their contribution to the research on the Central Mediterranean route and the reception context in both countries, in particular Ester Salis, Ferruccio Pastore, Jean-Pierre Gauci and Christine Cassar. Further thanks also go to Heaven Crawley, Katharine Jones, and Chiara Denaro for their contribution to data collection and Giulia Gonzales, Fiona McKinnon and Lucia Slot for research assistance in Italy and Malta. Aurelie Broeckerhoff and Dan Range made an important contribution to data analysis from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations, the MEDMIG team, and Jeff Crisp gave feedback on earlier drafts of this Research Brief. Thanks to Michael Braybrook for typesetting and design. We would also finally like to thank the interviewees who kindly shared their stories and everyone who facilitated access to participants and shared their insights, and the participants to the MEDMIG policy workshop organised in Rome on 17th May 2016, their feedback and debate has made an important contribution to our analysis. Needless to say, however, any mistakes are our own.



## Appendix

Appendix 1: Nationalities of MEDMIG interviewees from the Central Mediterranean route

Nationality	Number of interviewees
Gambia	45
Nigeria	42
Ghana	21
Eritrea	15
Mali	14
Ivory Coast	14
Senegal	10
Bangladesh	8
Guinea	6
Somalia	4
Syria	4
Egypt	4
Morocco	3
Togo	2
Sudan	2
Ethiopia	2
Palestine	1
Pakistan	1
Benin	1
Cameroon	1
Tunisia	1
Burkina Faso	1

Appendix 2: Nationalities of irregular arrivals by boat to Italy in 2015

Country of origin	2015
Eritrea	39162
Nigeria	22237
Somalia	12433
Sudan	8932
Gambia	8454
Syrian Arab Republic	7448
Senegal	5981
Mali	5826
Bangladesh	5040
Morocco	4647
Ghana	4431
Côte d'Ivoire	3772
Ethiopia	2631
Guinea	2629
Egypt	2610
Pakistan	1982
Palestinian Occ. Terr.	1673
Iraq	996
Tunisia	880
Cameroon	662
Other	11,417
Total	153843

Data from UNHCR and Italian Ministry of the Interior